

Soldiers and their families are learning new survival skills

# A STRUGGLE ON TWO FRONTS

By Anita  
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PHOTO MIKE MAEZ

● Anxious families await their soldiers at National Guard Armory homecoming.

The news reports of soldiers returning from the war in Iraq often suggest a happy ending. They are, after all, the lucky ones. They're alive.

The truth is that for many soldiers and their families, coming home is the beginning of another struggle that often includes a search for a new emotional balance in their relationships.

"The issues run the gamut," says Doug Mitchell, chairman of the Veterans Administration social work department in Phoenix. Conflicts can erupt over the most mundane issues, like who takes cares of the house, who gets to make decisions, basic communication, household finances and employment. Mitchell points to a "frozen-in-time" mentality that many active duty soldiers experience when they are away from home.

"When I go overseas, my life with my family stops that second," Mitchell says, adding that family members left behind have to step up to the responsibility of keeping it all together. "But they've had that whole year, making decisions, fixing the pipes, etc., and I step back in, expecting to begin where I left off."

#### HOME REPAIRS

Family Readiness Counselor Mercedes Garcia of the Arizona Army National Guard says she was determined to figure out what was wrong with

her bathroom's plumbing. Her husband, Staff Sgt. Jaime B. Garcia, now back from Iraq, smiled wryly during a recent interview as his wife recounts her experience with balky plumbing.

"I never knew about plumbing," the petite Latina admits. "I needed a vent, and the plumbing was going crazy. I didn't know you couldn't Liquid Nail PC pipe to plumbing, but it works!"

"It eats the pipe right up!" interjects the sergeant.

Plumbing technique aside, the soft-spoken

The Garcias' bathroom received a new coat of paint.

"Yes, the hallway bathroom is painted," Mercedes says. "I needed something to do and I painted it Hulk green."

"You have to wear your sunglasses in there when you turn that light on," Jaime says, laughing.

Also, the sergeant found his beloved garage had been turned into a bedroom for the family's college-age son. These days, he has to do his tinkering in a covered gazebo in the back yard. A

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— Staff Sgt. Laura Castañeda

sergeant adds, "I was gone for 16 months. She had to make a lot of decisions and I wasn't there for her. So whatever she did, I had to accept, whether I liked it or not, and deal with it after the fact. The decision had to be made and life went on."

Mercedes agrees. "You just have to deal and cope with what you can."

In the Garcia home, that included accepting home renovations Mercedes did in his absence.

#### GAP IN TIME

Laura Castañeda, 25, is a staff sergeant in the U.S. Air Force who manned a MK-19 machine gunner during her tour of Iraq. For Castañeda, adjusting to the reality of home required a huge effort.

"Trying to drive again," Castañeda, who was used to travel by Hummer, recalls. "Eating — just everything around you. I was touching everything. I asked myself, 'Is this real?'"

Stationed at Tallil Air Base in southern Iraq,

"There wasn't a moment that didn't go by that I wouldn't think about God and my family."

— Jaime Garcia



PHOTO MIKE MAEZ

A homemade banner welcomes soldiers as they disembark on their own soil.

Castañeda took convoys to Kuwait. Back home, she found she had to focus on the here and now, not the memories of the battlefield.

"Still, there are times when I get that way," she says. "You eventually learn to deal with it. Being a mom, you have no choice otherwise."

Her son, Mario Andres, is 22 months old. He was 5 months when she left for Iraq.

"I got back the weekend of his first birthday. I was happy, but at the same time I was sad," for having missed so much of Mario's babyhood.

Her mother and sister took care of Mario while she was gone.

"When I got back, he didn't know me," she says. "He didn't like me."

Motherhood called, but so did duty to her country, she says.

Castañeda re-enlisted for three more years while serving in Iraq. When she is through in 2008, she'll go back to ASU West to complete a degree, after which she hopes to become a police-woman.

In the meantime she waits for the call to return to Iraq.

## MILITARY BONDS

Airman Erica Jaramillo, 24, has experienced Iraq firsthand. As the first female fire fighter in the 162nd Fighter Wing of the Arizona Air National Guard, she has survived four months of battlefield horrors.

Her husband, Rodmar Manarang, 28, is an active duty Marine Corpman, who has already been through his own tour of Iraq. Also a fire fighter, he is preparing to leave soon for a second tour. The couple has no children, but they say they've learned to depend on each other and their respective families for support.

Jaramillo said they have not felt as much strain as others when they have been reunited, perhaps because they are, in a way, still newlyweds. Married in February 2004, they admit the deployments have interrupted their time together.

"It feels like we haven't even been together that long," Jaramillo says.

Yet having a spouse who has had the same battle experience has been comforting.

"That's what I think helped out a lot," she says. "He knows the ropes," adding that both of them talk to their parents a lot. The support "stayed within the family, pretty much."

For Jaramillo, the National Guard is a permanent avocation. A student when she was deployed, she is now a math instructor. But she intends to

stay with the Guard "for at least the full 20 years," while her husband, already an eight-year veteran, is looking to transfer into her unit so they can serve together.

To get to know each other better, the nearly newlyweds are planning a long trip to see his relatives back East. But holidays like the Fourth have changed for her, Jaramillo said. "Just having the personal experience, with people's lives being lost—it just kind of set a whole different meaning," she says. "It gives you a different feeling."

## INCOME CUTS

Jaramillo and her husband have been luckier than most. Relative to life before deployment, their personal finances have actually improved. For many of their fellow soldiers, that isn't the case.

By May of 2004, 55 percent of National Guard members and reservists had reported a loss of income over civilian jobs. According to government statistics, 49 percent of married Guard members and reservists reported a decrease in pay of \$1,000 a month or more as of May 2004; 42 percent of married Guard members and reservists report an increase in pay, as of the same time period. Another 15 percent of married Guard members and reservists have reported a decrease in pay of \$30,000 a year or more, as of May 2004.

In Arizona, the state Department of Economic Security (DES) offers what help it can to reservists searching for jobs through Ray Schafer, who works three days a week at the Family Support Center. Schafer helps military veterans and their spouses or family members find work.

While many of the returning troops go back to their job, Schafer says that in one recently returned group, 13 reservists did not have jobs. If their jobs have disappeared, Schafer said the veterans have other recourses under a re-employment act.

## SUPPORT NET

About 6 percent of the National Guard is self-employed, which poses a problem for retaining medical insurance. And an estimated 18 percent of National Guard members and reservists have turned to military family support organizations for assistance, as of May 2004.

Mercedes Garcia, in addition to keeping her own life in order, helps other families figure out what to do in times of emergency.

"The National Guard has the family emergency relief fund and also the family assistance fund," she says. "A lot of the community has been

really good, and they give you food cards. People come here to the Family Support Center, and they get assistance."

A relatively new medical insurance program, Tricare Reserve Select, became available in April for certain reservists, according to Jody A. Reidenhour, supervisory human resources specialist at the support center.

But there is a catch.

"It's only for those drilling members of the selected reserve who were deployed on Title 10 status, in support of a contingency since Sept. 11, 2001," Reidenhour explains. "It's not for everybody. It's for those soldiers, and of course, their eligible dependents. They have to stay in the selected reserve. If they get out of the special reserve, then they lose it. And it's for purchase, it's not free."

Staff Sgt. Garcia, however, likes the program's payoff in return for time served. He and his family make use of the program.

"We're trying to get all our members that have returned to enroll in this," he says.

Unfortunately, an attempt in Congress to expand access to the health-care program on a permanent basis failed when Republican opponents removed the provision as part of the latest defense authorization bill — a \$440-billion package for fiscal 2005 — before the bill reached the House floor for voting.

## PATRIOT ACTS

For the Garcias, life on the home front is slowly evolving into a new normalcy.

"There wasn't a moment that didn't go by that I wouldn't think about God and my family," Jaime Garcia says. "He'd come first, because I'd have to ask Him to give me the strength and keep me safe, so I could come back to my family. I think that's the only reason why we made it back. He probably got tired of me, family members, and friends asking Him to keep them safe."

As for the Fourth of July, the Garcias will celebrate in their usual manner: a big family barbecue. Mercedes says she's always expressed her patriotism with lots of red, white and blue decorations.

"If you would see my house, everybody says it looks like Uncle Sam threw up in it," Mercedes jokes. "My father was in World War II and the Korean War. My uncle went to Vietnam. He didn't come back."

Her first husband, now deceased, was in the Navy.

"Uncle Sam has always been my Uncle Sam, from when I was little."

Several months back from the battlefields of Iraq, Jaime's attitude is a bit more subdued.

"Right now, I guess you could call it gun shy," he says. "There were some kids who did some fireworks at home, outside, behind us. It just took me by surprise and I hit the ground. It just startled me. I'm not ready for that. As for the holiday, bring it. But as far as activities, I think I'll just lock up my house and just stay there."

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— Airman Erica Jaramillo